



I Have Played Christ Long Enough! Mikles Jancsó Talks with Gideon Bachmann in Rome

Mikles Jancsó; Gideon Bachmann

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(quoted below), one of whose main points is that Griffith's films lack the quality.

6. Griffith must have Anna's story in mind as that of *Tess* of the D'Urbervilles. The false marriage (as in the editions of *Tess* common in Griffith's time) to a wealthy rake whom the heroine meets on a journey from a shiftless mother to a rich cousin; the dying baby baptized by the heroine in the middle of the night; the farm surrounded by water meads where the recuperating heroine meets and loves but feels guilty at accepting an angelic lover: these and other details must be means to recreate *Tess*, and there is no hint of them in the melodrama by Lottie Blair Parker, *Way Down East* (n.p.: privately printed, 1899).

7. The visual treatment of Paul and Inga interplays with

their rendered experience much as the music of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* interplays with the experience of the lovers. While these cases are particularly striking I think they are merely especially obvious instances of a general rule which also applies to the last-minute rescue. Joseph Kerman rightly argues in his wonderful *Opera as Drama* (New York: Knopf, 1956) that for dramatic poetry "in the largest sense the dramatic form is articulated by the poetry in conjunction with the plot structure. The same can be true of music" (p. 9). I think it can be extended: as language is to written literature and as music is to opera, so *mise-en-scène* is to film.

8. André Bazin, "The Evolution of Film Language," translated by and in Peter Graham, *The New Wave* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), p. 49.

I Have Played Christ Long Enough!

Miklos Jancsó talks with Gideon Bachmann in Rome

It is the first Sunday on which Italians are forbidden to drive. A warm winter drizzle turns the big square in front of Rome's Pantheon into a shiny mirror, reflecting incongruous images: hundreds of brand-new bicycles ridden by unusually calm-faced families. Fathers who shamefacedly wobble along on rusty old knowledge while their kids are far ahead into the crowd. Mothers trying to mould their fur coats to the new requirements. An occasional collision, unlike the ones common for the square: calm, rather joyful encounters between cyclists and pedestrians. No screaming. It seems that the oil shortage has given Italy back its human dimension. But hanging in the air, grey in its imminence like the rain, is tomorrow, when tumultuous traffic will again engulf the ancient ruins, and when the same people who now benignly share the unexpected comfort will unlimber their arsenal of aggressive verbiage, ready at a fender's screech to launch into damnation.

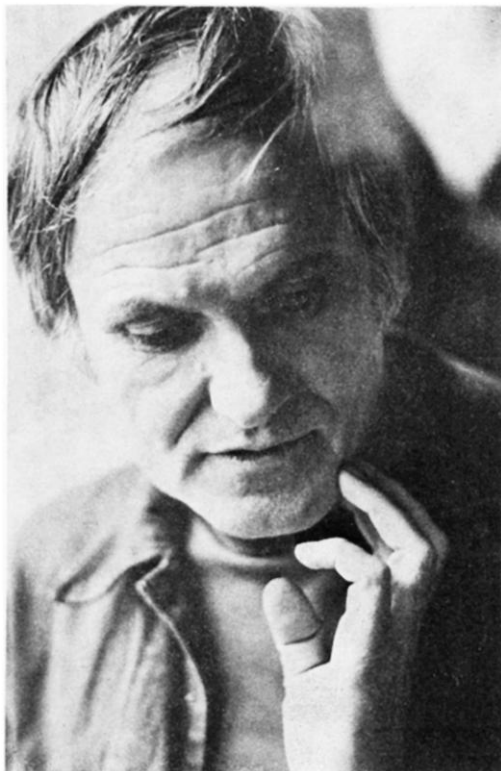
It all seems terribly symbolic of the fate of the man with whom I am looking down at all

this. From his window, which gives on the square, Miklos Jancsó seems to regard the temporary benevolence with the grain of salt that his life has taught him: the dreadful tomorrow sits in the corners of his mouth like the fake smile of doom. He has made the films he has wanted to make, he has made them in the country where he would have liked to make them, he has said the things he has been hoping to say and people have understood him. But will it all have been worthwhile when the chips of automation and industrialization are counted?

We are moved to make our statements by the blind hope that saying things will change matters. Such is the human weapon against destruction: illusion and hope against all odds. Jancsó has been stating and restating the theme of the century which we all share and which none of us seems capable of altering: that continuing down the path of intolerance we destroy the last vestiges of all that is human in our souls. It is a romantic theme, and like all romantic themes denigrated by intellectuals and political realists alike. Jancsó's romanticism has been slightly

more successful than others', because he is a formalist and we love the accomplished forms of the technological age. But, like Roman traffic, he provides no hope.

The man himself is a perfect illustration of his work. The apartment he shares with an Italian writer, a woman who has done a lot of work in theater, is modern. The tables are transparent, the chairs square metal and plastic, the bookshelves laden heavily with Adorno, Lukács, Benjamin, and Marcuse. It is the citrus season; oranges and mandarins abound. There is an air of acceptance mixed with a fatalism of style. The decor seems to say, with the man: I do not like my epoch but I live in it and will do the best I can. After we finish our conversation he invites us back for dinner which he will cook. I am a romantic myself: I will come.



Are you religious?

Now, most probably, I am an atheist. Or have become one. But I have a lot of experience with the Christs. I have played the part in life. I used to think that humanity could be saved.

And you were disappointed and have given up that idea?

Perhaps. I can't judge myself very well. I feel quite old, too. I'm really not sure whether I've given it up.

Do you feel much has changed within the period since you started making films?

Yes. I began 25 years ago. Documentaries, newsreels. About eight or nine years of that. Also criticism. Nothing very significant; after all, it was the Stalinist era. Small magazines. Now the epoch of the commissars is somewhat over.

Revoluting against it created some fine films in Hungary. Now it seems to me the waves you make are smaller.

What can we do? The most interesting theme is finished. We have become experts in Stalinism. But to talk of it today is boring. We know too much about power and the games played with it by the leaders. So what is left to the Hungarian cinema now, in terms of themes, are little things: how life changes, how it is full of contradictions and conflicts. But I think that at this moment cinema the world over is somewhat in decline.

Maybe it's a decline in the cinema's utility in the fight for the liberation of the soul. Since it hasn't proven a very useful tool, people believe in it less.

No, I don't think that's it. People continue believing in literature, for example. Great literature is always successful. Things go in waves. Where ten years ago the public went for American literature, today they seek out that of South America. Because today that's where there is a need for hope. The reason I find cinema is in decline is because the world is. There is a lack of philosophy, a lack of hope. There is nothing concrete to attach yourself to. Neither in cinema

Miklos Jancsó: photograph by Deborah Beer.

nor in art nor anywhere else. It's our consumer society . . .

Do you believe then, that even in other times, before conscious culture, say in the beginning of agriculture, in the first Chinese and Egyptian empires, people always needed a hope for a better future in order to carry on? Wasn't it ever enough for man to live day by day?

We were never such a big group as now. And there have always been middle-class intellectuals who have directed society. A class that exploits and assumes power. We know very well that a certain antihumanitarian consciousness has always existed. So the others, the exploited, have always needed hope in order to continue. This dichotomy has always existed. At the moment, with Giovanna, I'm doing a small film for Italian television about old Rome, a play on Caesar and Octavian, and together we have read a thousand source books, and we find little has changed. Even Caesar went along on the basis of hope. I must say that I find him to have been rather an idiot. I think, finally, that we are built to need hope.

You think we are the only animal suffering from this deformation, this need of living always tomorrow?

Exactly.

That practically says that our end is foreshadowed by our intrinsic make-up.

Yes. We know the end. We are, in fact, slightly ahead of ourselves. And that seems to be our basic dimension. It's incredible, nobody, not even the petite bourgeoisie, can live for the day. Look at all the shopowners around this square: why do you think they are all fascists? Because they are looking for security, security for tomorrow. They live perfectly well now, but they seek insurance. And for them this insurance lies in order, in power, in maintaining a governing system.

So really this is a result of fear?

Certainly. Perhaps without fear you wouldn't have to rely so heavily on hope. Tomorrow, the future, they always instill fear in human beings. Only rare intellectuals can escape this constant fear, especially those not used to employing

oppressive methods in dealing with their peers. A writer or artist can manage to live without touching the rights of others.

The way the artist touches one's rights may just be a different form of aggression, not a physical form. Perhaps mentally influencing you is worse? The physical aggression, being the natural, animal form, is perhaps preferable.

What is natural? Is eating more natural than thinking? Perhaps. That would be why the working classes are always right, yes? They live a physical existence, so physical action is more "correct" . . . maybe.

Marxism would be endangered by such a viewpoint. To say that revolutions without theoretical analysis are impossible, as Lenin did, would be wrong. In fact, as Susan Sontag claims, in the cultural sense, which is what we are talking about, the fascist ones were revolutions just as much as those of the left, with the theories just romantically added later.

I wouldn't go that far. For me, without thinking, nothing can be done. Philosophy, the working of the mind, is the center of anybody's day, and something always grows out of it which cannot necessarily be justified tomorrow. Perhaps that is how we are always creating religions. In order to survive, the ruling class always creates a religion. Stalinism was a religion, too. I know, I was a Stalinist myself.

But you won't claim that it was a result of the working of minds? It was an emotionally born need to belong, in other words, another hope.

I am not sure. We don't know how the mind works. We are totally separated from nature. We find something always stands in our way, something keeps us from realizing our natural physical existence without conflict. None of the ways we have embarked upon to eliminate these conflicts have been very direct ways. Probably nobody has found a good way to live naturally today.

Perhaps if we didn't insist on seeking answers with the limited forces of the brain and instead tried to seek answers directly through our bodies, we might find it easier to bridge the culture gap;

to reach a peace within society.

Or through the sensibility of our soul, perhaps. As I say, religions don't exist by accident. The bible, for example, bases its whole theory of salvation on purity of soul. This theory has always existed. The Christians and Jews didn't exactly invent it. We've known for centuries that we are evermore separated from nature and that we must find our way back to it. Maybe in another century or two we'll get there.

You are really optimistic in the sense that we will achieve this through the use of the mind? You think we can find ways that do not exist in nature? Ways back?

Yes, I am sure. Science will help man to find the ways.

In your films this conflict is always depicted, but never resolved. Hope, then, judging from your films, can exist at best in the spectator.

Why should I actually depict hope? My films are always small films that do not reach many people. They can touch maybe ten or a hundred people. They are like a conversation between us. There is no need to show my friends, on the screen, the existence of optimism. If optimism exists, it exists inside of us.

This might lead us to the question of why are you making films at all? There is always, in public art, the conflict between wanting to express oneself and wanting to convince others. I think artists must always face this conflict.

Then I don't think I am an artist. I make cinema, and cinema is not an art. It's a new form of expression that may or may not be useful. Useful to what? I don't even know. I make cinema for myself, for my friends, and sometimes, let's say, I have more friends than at other times. But even when I touch more people, it's always only students, young workers, some intellectuals. I've never made anything very popular. Probably just because I don't want to convince others. I start with the belief that people are intelligent. I don't think I need to begin at A all the time.

Are you sure, or is this another hope?

It's a sure hope.

Very talmudic. It could also just be an alibi.

An alibi for someone who can't do anything else? Yes, perhaps so.

Well, the cinema seems an awfully heavy form for talking to one's friends. Even in order to enlarge their circle, you might be better off writing or lecturing. You'd get to the same number of people with less effort.

Oh, of course. I am convinced that it was a mistake on my part to make films. It is true that it is a heavy medium: organizing, preparing, convincing, discussing, negotiating . . . incredible. I should paint, discuss with the young . . .

Or the old . . .

. . . or the old, yes. Anyway, with friends.

No, I'm serious. Isn't there, in what you say, an echo of that coffeehouse anarchism of the turn of the century, when politics were discussed among friends of convinced groupings, but failed when confronted with the Czar's police? After 1968, so many creative people seem to retreat to the position of working in small circles, "with the young." And even that kind of work, of course, includes what you say you wish to avoid: convincing.

As I said, I think much has changed since I started, and certainly since politics were elitist. The world is smaller and faster. The coffee-houses are bigger. I mean the intellectual circles. I think that today ideas cannot remain abstract and limited to the few.

The easy accessibility of ideas, or let's say the expansion of ideas in the age of their technical reproducibility, is just as dangerous. Look at the blind Marxism of the young in France and Germany, the whole Third-World mystique. Most of their widely held ideas are not founded in autonomous experience, and Lenin would have been one of the first to shudder at their emotional base. This is a phenomenon of insecurity as well: the need to belong to what you think is tomorrow. It is also a result of the world having become smaller and faster, and thus less suited to individual thinking.

You may be right. We must fight against taking ideas as if they were religion. Marxism as a point of departure for individual thinking. Again I think it was Stalin who was the villain:

he made a bible out of theory. At the time perhaps that was the only way to go about things, since people wanted secure beliefs. It may have been the only way to save the Soviet Union then. Whereas Lenin had been full of contradictions. Stalin did what Jesus did: he took the doubts out of the bible. But I hate this political Jesuitism. I have played Christ long enough! We have seen all religions fail, including our Stalinist one.

Don't you sometimes feel that the more remote and inaccessible a thing is, the more it attracts us? That in fact the difference between an idea and a religion may be its mystic remoteness? Isn't it safer if our idols are not in danger of being approached?

Of course! Why else do you think Christianity still exists? All this crap like paradise is safely remote. As I said: hope is a basic human need. Here on earth we are poor, but rich in promises.

We started out by talking about the fascist shopkeepers on the square downstairs. You said they were fascist because they were afraid of tomorrow. But couldn't it be reasoned that this fear is better, because it's physical, compared to the intellectual's hope, which is mythical? They will never become Jesuits . . .

But they will become violent. This is an obsession of mine: I cannot stand violence, especially in society, and I cannot stand oppression. I cannot accept the physical gesture. To me it represents the great danger. To say this is really my reason for making films.

But in your films violence is sensual, carnal, aesthetic, almost attractive. You never show its culmination. The tremendous plasticity of your images never permits an explosion of savagery. It's a ritualistic apotheosis. That's why I started by asking you if you were religious.

I think this aesthetic violence is more dangerous. Take the films of Leni Riefenstahl. There is deep beauty in the shot of Hitler walking between the thousands saluting him in silence. It's not the ideas of national socialism that make this an attractive film, but the attractiveness of the shots that sells the ideas. The beauty of violence is extremely suggestive. That's its danger.

Showing this beauty, isn't that dangerous in itself? Couldn't your films work against you?

I can only hope that they won't. I am certainly trying to show that mankind can't go on like this. That beauty hides destruction.

Another hope, then. You hope your work will counteract that which you show. You trust the spectator to be capable of a moral step: from the attraction of (or to) violence, to its refusal. Your shopkeepers aren't likely to be able to make this step. You will end up making films for those who really don't need them. Your hopefully-large group of friends will agree with you without seeing the film.

But the others, the shopkeepers, may not be convincible at all! Finally I think my films are addressed to neither my convinced friends nor the unconvincible shopkeepers, but to an in-between group, that may be capable of opening up just a little bit, at least. And I think it's this in-between group that is ever growing as the world is getting smaller and faster. And I think that the growth of this group also serves as a guarantee in the political sense: it's because of them that fascism will not pass. Of course you could say that the mystic group, the fascism-seekers, grows as well. But I trust in the thinking of the in-between more than in the mysticism of the shopkeepers.

Except that we have established that there is a great deal of mysticism in the left as well . . .

Yes, but I find this rather an interesting development, this movement of youth from right to left and back again, with methods often difficult to distinguish. Often they are very courageous, and positive in their refusal to accept traditions. Of course it's a basic search for power, because once you have the police and the tanks, you no longer need philosophy. Even Khaddafi claims he's a socialist, and then starts to laugh like a madman. The young fascists at least have the courage to say that they are the reaction. Inasmuch as this is a return to point zero, it may even be a positive development. At least it teaches us to give up the comfortable, intellectual illusions. A start with less empty hope. Unless this leads to Buddhism . . .

Oh, no! There's a notable difference. I think Buddhism is a giving up.

Certainly. I am, in fact, ferociously against all that, all this nonsense of India and Nepal and all that. Those are renunciations. I won't renounce. Maybe we can agree on something, after all.

Yes, except that I don't think that the cinema is useful as a medium for expressing oneself or for talking to anybody about these ideas. Even this conversation we are having seems more useful to me. We can have one each day, and maybe say something radically different each day. With cinema it would take me half a year to say what I've said to you this afternoon.

That is true, but I am not young enough. I have done many things, but all useless.

I wouldn't say that. Your work has given a sense of identity to many people. I don't know whether it will reach as many people as you hope it will, but that creative circle that every artist attempts in the form of a bridge between himself and his interlocutor, you are closing it with hope. It becomes part of your creation itself.

That's very beautiful. I hope it's true. The fact is that I am in crisis. Why don't I really do other things? Like cooking, for example. Finding physical relationships, more direct relationships. Expressing oneself in a relationship with one other person. I've tried to go along these lines; I've recently directed two small plays. In Hungary, one after *Confrontations* and one after *Red Psalm*. Plays give me another way of contacting people. I stay in the theater when they are given, and it gives me a physical contact, an immediate connection. It's in a small studio theater in Budapest, with about 80 seats, the actors are nonprofessionals, friends. The contacts are not cold as in the cinema.

Do I understand you correctly to be saying, in response to my question, that the reason you are continuing with cinema is that you are not sure you can do anything else, but that you are, at least, trying?

Exactly.

Reviews

THE CONVERSATION

Written, produced, and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Director of Photography: Bill Butler. Music: David Shire. Editor: Richard Chew. Paramount.

With *The Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola managed to avoid a single moment that could really be called "bad"—bad technically, bad visually, bad conceptually. But, formally speaking, there isn't a single memorable moment in the film either, not a single moment, when you feel the medium is being used. Obviously Coppola was not about to lose sleep thinking up epiphanies for a story such as Puzo's. In fact after *The Conversation* it's difficult to imagine Coppola stretching himself for anyone's story but his own. The place to look in *The Godfather* is always screen-center. Search your memory for peripheral details, the kind of details that mean a fully rounded world is going on, and you won't find them. It's not that the screen isn't crowded. It is—the way naturalistic stage settings are. And for the same reason: to establish a convincingly illusionistic milieu for the principals. In *The Godfather* nothing apart from the central characters and events has a life of its own.

The Conversation stewed in Coppola's mind for seven years before he completed a screen play and directed what is unmistakably his own bad dream. Instead of a competent but obvious piece of archaeological reconstruction, we have a here-and-now world with lots of incidental, unpieced-together detail. The real-life subtext of the film is contemporary man's devotion to media—his loving manipulation of switches, knobs, and buttons—in contrast to his Martian estrangement from both other people's bodies and, even more frightening, his own. The film could be titled *The Hard Skin*. The Truffaut film's concentration on switches, buttons, zippers, etc. vis-à-vis soft body contact is a psychological anatomy lesson. Coppola enlarges the schism into social psychosis.